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Testimony of Tennessee Commissioner of Education Penny Schwinn, PhD, MAT  
United States House of Representatives

Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education Subcommittee Hearing:

“Underfunded & Unprepared: Examining How to Overcome Obstacles to Safely Reopen Public Schools”  
Thursday, July 23, 2020, at 10:15 a.m. (EST)

Good morning, Chairman Sablan, Ranking Member Allen and Members of the Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education Subcommittee. Thank you for inviting me to testify at today’s hearing, “Underfunded & Unprepared: Examining How to Overcome Obstacles to Safely Reopen Public Schools.” I very much appreciate the opportunity to share Tennessee’s story and the incredible work that continues to be done by our districts, educators, and department of education on behalf of our students. I want to thank all of these remarkable individuals for their commitment to the health and safety of our children, as well as thank Governor Bill Lee and the Tennessee General Assembly for their unwavering support in prioritizing education.

As commissioner at the Tennessee Department of Education, I understand the critical importance of the school re-opening decisions being made and the impact that those decisions can have on staff, students, and communities. I feel those decisions as a mother of school-aged children; a family member of teachers; as a colleague to those who serve our schools and districts each and every day. However, I also feel those decisions as a former teacher and principal to children who relied on my school for critical resources and services; to families who needed the community resources that our school provided and the in-person instruction that allowed them to work to support their families financially. It is in the face of these realities that our state and our districts must determine how they keep students healthy and safe and provide a high quality education.

I recognize the challenges that are ahead of us, and I would urge this body to recognize the complicated fabric that makes up our public school systems and understand that, unfortunately, these are not straightforward decisions. There are risks to every choice and consequences to every decision. Our responsibility as public officials is to mitigate as many of those risks and consequences as possible, so that no matter where or by what method parents choose to educate their children, they can feel confident that we are collectively committed to serving their children’s needs. This will be incredibly hard to do and require more from us than ever before. However, it is imperative that it takes place.

School reopening must consider the various perspectives of our broader community with the fine-tuned care and complexity of reality— and not with the blunt instrument of politics. These are conversations about children and teachers. We must treat them as we would in discussions about our own families – because they are. In Tennessee, our families and communities have shared three primary concerns:

- *Health and Safety in Schools:* We know that schools were not built to handle pandemics and that there are a number of changes that need to be made to enhance safety precautions and to implement recommended practices like physical distancing and no-touch solutions. We need to ensure that our schools have what they need to open safely. That will require increased federal support.
- *Child Wellbeing:* We have seen the reports that over the last five months more students have gone hungry, suicide rates have increased, abuse cases have gone unreported, and critical health and counseling services cannot be provided. We also know that working parents are making difficult decisions about what to do with their children if they have to work and if there is not a childcare option available. Schools play a critical role in supporting student’s physical and mental health.
- *Achievement Gaps and Literacy:* We know that the period of school closures elevated the public’s awareness of the longstanding achievement gaps and the significant concerns we collectively have with literacy in this country. Further, we know that closure will continue to lead to greater learning loss and that our most vulnerable students will be most negatively impacted. We must consider the long-term effects of this on our children – those who are not likely to ever catch-up and what we know to be true about what that means for their futures.

In reviewing these considerations, we know that the decisions we make have consequences for people, no matter what. However, that is why I feel strongly that we need to provide options and opportunities for families to make the choices that best meet their needs and those of their children; that we provide educators and staff with the resources they need to feel safe and protected at school and to allow for flexibility for those with underlying health risks; that regardless of the seat a child sits in to be educated this year – whether at home or at school – we have provided the necessary resources to ensure that child receives a high-quality education and all of the services necessary for them to be successful. ***At the core, we have the monumental task of keeping people safe and healthy, and providing children with a strong education.***

***Given that, as we plan for school reopening this fall, we must continue to ask ourselves: What is in the best interest of students and staff, as we balance the needs of community health with the needs for children to have access to strong educational opportunities, families to be able to financially support themselves, and critical services to be delivered to students?***

Prioritizing both the health and safety of students as well as academic instruction, the Tennessee Department of Education has continued to work closely with district superintendents, community organizations, partner groups, public officials, and advisory committees to ensure that we collectively provide as many opportunities as possible to support our school communities. Our districts face significant choices that may impact their communities for years. Those decisions are not easy and must be done locally to ensure that they meet the individual needs of their local contexts. That is both the right and more challenging thing to do as we look to provide state-level strategies to address local needs.

### Supporting Local Strategies

***School reopening must include supports for our local districts, as needs increase and resource efficiencies become critical. This must be done with a child-centered strategy.***

Over the last several months, the department has been working hard to ensure that LEAs had resources related to school building closures, graduation ceremonies, and shifts in the policy landscape. Over the last 4-6 weeks, the department has been working to produce a suite of resources and supports for school reopening. Regardless of the reopening option(s), districts will still need ways to determine the academic, physical and mental health needs of returning students. Districts should ensure that there is a child wellbeing plan in place to address the different social and mental health needs that may exist for some students due to school closures and resulting from the impact of the pandemic and recent events. Specifically, the department of education has produced or facilitated 20+ toolkits, a framework guide, professional development for principals and teachers, and a series of other resources to help districts begin to plan for next year. These were necessary in order to provide directionality for the field and also to set clear, minimum expectations for instruction in partnership with the Tennessee State Board of Education.

To help develop a shared framework for school reopening, the department produced the **LEA Guide for Reopening Schools**, an extensive resource produced to provide an overview framework for districts as they begin planning for school reopening. It outlines 10+ different pathways that districts could consider for school reopening, most of which prioritize in-person learning.

The department also knows how important it is to stay in close contact with districts as we move into the new school year. As such, the department hosts **regular calls** three times per week **and a series of targeted monthly meetings** with superintendents, in addition to optional weekly 1:1 calls with superintendents through our regional offices. Further, the department has developed concierge support teams to provide districts targeted support. Finally, the department hosts bi-monthly partner calls statewide to outline opportunities for coherent support of the reopening strategy.

The department will be focusing heavily on reopening schools and ensuring as many as possible do so in person. The department created a number of toolkits that outline what needs to be in place for school to occur in-person in an easy-to-use checklist format. When remote instruction is necessary, the department is also overseeing continuous learning plans (CLPs), as outlined in State Board rule and policy. By focusing on supports for in-person and planning strategies for remote instruction, Tennessee districts are better prepared to handle shifting contexts and to meet families' needs.

The department is in the process of developing and finalizing **20+ Reopening [Toolkits](#) and Templates**, which will cover many of the same topics as school closure toolkits did. Over the course of the next few weeks, these resources will be provided to district leaders, many of whom contributed to the content and framing of this work as a reflection of what authentic and meaningful partnership can look like in times of uncertainty.

These ***school reopening toolkits*** include:

- Academics
- Assessing Student Learning
- Childcare
- Communications

- Consolidated Funding Applications
- Counseling
- Equitable Access and Opportunity
- Finance
- Governance and Management
- Health and Public Health
- Nutrition
- Policy and Legal Considerations
- Postsecondary Transitions
- Procedures
- Professional Development
- Public Charter and Non-Public Schools
- Safety and Operations: Emergency Operations, Pandemic, Post-recovery Evaluation
- School Improvement
- Social Distancing at Schools
- Special Populations
- Staffing
- Technology
- Transportation
- Wellbeing and Mental Health

### *Health & Safety in Schools*

***School reopening must put the health and safety of our children, their teachers, and our communities front of mind.***

The department of education has partnered closely with the Tennessee Department of Health, the Tennessee Emergency Management Agency (TEMA), and Governor Lee’s Unified Command to address the needs of the pandemic. This cross-agency partnership has led to a number of significant resources:

- Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) will be provided to every school at no cost to the district. This includes no-contact thermometers and masks for all students and staff for school opening.
- In partnership with the department of health and our higher education partners, the state is developing community-facing dashboards to ensure that families can have better access to information about virus spread in their broader school communities.
- The department of education has partnered with the department of health to co-create a series of resources to walk districts through decisions to reopen in person as well as considerations for when to make building closure decisions should confirmed positive cases be found in schools during the year. These resources include a decision-tree document, a decision matrix, and four health-related toolkits. The department of health has also reviewed several resources developed by the department of education to ensure consistency between school-based recommendations and health guidelines.
- The department of education has partnered with a cross-section of state agencies to align overlapping workstreams and develop coherent approaches to these complex problems. For example, the department is hosting weekly calls to discuss opportunities for collaborative work to support school reopening with agencies such as Health, Commerce and Insurance, TennCare, Mental Health and Substance Abuse, Human Services, Higher Education, Developmental Disabilities, and Labor and Workforce Development.
- The state believes that all educators and staff who return to school buildings should be provided with the necessary resources to ensure they feel like they have what they need in their classrooms. This should not supplant local district efforts to provide sufficient materials and additional custodial services throughout the day and overnight. However, the state will provide a direct allocation of resources to teachers, so that teachers do not feel the need to purchase anything out-of-pocket.

Additional resources to support the health and safety of schools who choose to reopen in person would include: additional funding for overstock personal hygiene supplies; signage throughout buildings to reinforce safe practices; funds to purchase equipment like touchless trashcans and doors; additional supplies of PPE; additional resources for transportation costs (buses or expanded contracts); additional janitorial services to allow for more frequent disinfecting practices throughout the day; and additional resources for classrooms (modified furniture to allow for social distancing, etc.).

These are just a handful of the significant operational and health-related considerations that must be reviewed and planned at the school and district level. While schools are not typically built for this level of operational emergency and health response, districts are working diligently to make the changes necessary to keep people safe. As such, our systems must also remain flexible enough to make changes as the data indicates and the pandemic evolves.

***School reopening must include a series of scenarios from which local districts may operate, in the best interest of local needs.***

In Tennessee, the state believes that local districts must be allowed to make the decisions that are best for their communities. Given the significant regional differences, the state understands that a one-size fits all approach will not support all districts effectively. Instead, the state will continue to provide baseline resources that any district may adopt and modify, as best suits their local contexts. Currently, almost every district in the state is providing for an in-person and remote option, allowing families to choose what makes the most sense for their children and personal contexts. For those small districts who do not have the capacity to structure a full online or remote option, the state will launch a year-long set of videos that can be viewed online or downloaded onto devices, inclusive of instructional materials and checkpoints for student growth and understanding.

The decision on how to reopen schools is a challenging one which balances health and education. Both are important to the future of our children and all facts must be included in the discussion as it progresses. What is most critical is that local needs, resources and statistics drive decision-making within the framework and boundaries outlined through the departments of health and education. At the core, though, families must make the decisions that are best for their children.

### **Child Wellbeing**

***School reopening must consider child wellbeing, regardless of the format of instruction being provided, so that every child has his or her needs met and services provided.***

Children in Tennessee, and across the country, rely on their schools to provide meals, health services, counseling, mandated reporting, and more. When schools are closed, those services become more challenging to deliver and can impact a child's ongoing development.

- The department launched the **Child Wellbeing Task Force** to focus on the needs of all students during the summer and throughout next year. The task force will continue to provide recommendations and

reports, build a framework for local implementation, and create long-term solutions to ensure all children are cared for during times of building closure.

- Over the course of the year, the department will build a **Child Wellbeing Online Resource Tool** to more quickly connect services with schools and students during the year, whether in-person or remote.
- The department provided **Assistive Technology Grants** to districts to support purchasing assistive technology so that students with disabilities are able to receive services during periods of building closure.
- The department also provided **Compensatory Services Grants**, which served as automatic awards to every district to help support any expenses related to providing compensatory services in the fall, in support of catching-up students with disabilities.
- The department's **Special Education Innovation Grant** for districts to fund the expansion of strategies and practices to serve students with disabilities during periods of school building closure.

Additional resources could be of critical importance for child wellbeing. For example, additional federal funding could provide for daily child wellbeing checks, more robust and safer food delivery systems, the development of more remote opportunities for counseling and tele-health supports, and more extensive in-school programs to provide duplicative sets of resources for when classrooms must quickly close for health reasons. As a note, these opportunities not only ensure consistent service delivery to students, but also provide for short-term employment for those who are looking for work.

### **Academic Achievement & Literacy**

*School reopening must include clear plans for ensuring that all students have access to a quality education, regardless of the delivery format. This must be done in consideration of all students, including those with disabilities, those who speak languages other than English, and those who are part of our other more vulnerable populations.*

To support this work, the department has taken a number of critical steps to provide districts with a series of critical supports, both for reopening and also for ongoing implementation.

- The department will be providing non-competitive grants for districts related to implementation support through **Reopening Implementation Cohorts**. We know that planning is easier than “doing,” and districts will need help throughout next year. The department will provide LEA grants to identify local partners to supplement internal capacity and do that intentional and deep work for each of the 147 school districts through an opt-in, cohort model.
- The department will launch an **Online Academic Tool** for districts to use which will provide a video library, assessment builder, online professional development and more to districts, in support of their local needs during periods of remote learning. The tool will be ready for launch this school year that will provide a full year of ELA and math lessons for 1<sup>st</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> grades, providing coherent sets of instructional materials linked to relevant standards supports, sample assessment items, and content-based resources. Districts can use this comprehensive set of video lessons to assign to absent students, remote learning students, and in classrooms where teaching staff might be limited.
- Partnership with all six Tennessee **PBS stations** to deliver up to 30 hours per week of daily academic instruction and educational content to first through eighth grade students during times of school



closure. Developed by the department in collaboration with Tennessee teachers, three hundred and twenty lessons on math and English language arts were broadcasted statewide. These videos are also posted on the department's YouTube page where they have received over 77,000 views. Accompanying lesson plans for educators and student work packets are available on the department's website.

- The department created free instructional materials through a **Foundational Skills Curriculum** for early literacy that can be used in classrooms in-person or remotely, to reduce costs and still maintain a focus on early literacy. (Saves districts money and increases access to high quality materials.)
- Partnership with the ReadyRosie early education platform to provide Tennessee families with **free and easy access to critical early literacy lessons**. Around two minutes long in both English and Spanish, the video "moments" feature real families demonstrating instructional activities that parents can then replicate with their own children and are rooted in learning goals for children on topics such as literacy, early math, health and wellbeing.
- Partnership with the Tennessee STEM Innovation Network (TSIN) to develop the STE(A)M Resource Hub to provide three weekly challenges to promote **critical thinking and career exploration** that can all be done in the home. The challenges are ideal for students grades 3-12, but younger students can also participate with parental assistance.
- The department is providing a free beginning-of-year **Checkpoint Assessment** available for districts to use to gauge student learning (including learning loss) to support educators in identifying areas of need.
- The department is providing a free suite of **Innovative Assessment** supports available for districts to use including an assessment builder, interim assessments, and formative assessments.
- With the Tennessee Higher Education Commission, the department launched a **Post-Secondary Task Force** to support transition needs of high schoolers to post-secondary pathways.

Additional resources could continue to support academic programming by allowing for families to have access to full sets of materials at home and at school, providing coherence and greater flexibility in the case of closures. These resources include instructional materials, school supplies, and more.

### **Supporting Educators & Systems**

***School reopening must consider the needs of school and district staff and ensure that any decision includes their voices and opinions.***

The department has and will continue to provide a series of resources to support educators in providing instruction in a remote environment, as well as providing resources to ensure that there are sufficient staff to support in-person instruction. This includes supports for broadening the number of credentialed staff in key areas, supporting district recruitment and hiring, expanding the pool of available substitutes (and providing free professional development for their training), etc.

- Partnership with the University of Tennessee's Center for Educational Leadership to support principals at no cost as they lead their staff and schools in addressing student needs. The **Tennessee Principal Professional Learning Series** leverages the intellectual resources of the university, as well as other external expertise, to address the most pressing problems of practice facing school principals. As of June 6<sup>th</sup>, more than 500 principals representing 82 of Tennessee's 95 counties have completed this training.

- Partnership with Trevecca Nazarene University to offer **free professional development for Tennessee teachers** to help them prepare for digital teaching and learning. As of June 6<sup>th</sup>, over 14,000 Tennessee teachers have participated in this training.
- **Family Remote Learning Tool** – in partnership with Trevecca Nazarene University, the department is rolling-out an online resource to support families in managing learning from home.
- **Diverse Leaders Network** – a network to increase the number of aspiring, diverse school leaders that will pay for their master’s degrees and support expected vacancies in the field.
- **Aspiring Assistant Principal Network** – a network to increase the number of aspiring school leaders that will pay for their master’s degrees and support expected vacancies in the field.
- **Special Education Additional Endorsement Grants** – a grant to pay for existing and aspiring teachers to become dual certified in special education, especially to support expected vacancies in the field.
- **Tennessee Teacher Job Connect and Tennessee Education Job Board** – an online page to connect vacancies with job-seekers during remote recruitment and hiring.

Additional resources from the federal government could support educator salary increases or bonuses for additional responsibilities, hiring more school-site staff who would be responsible for additional duties that typically fall to teachers (such as nurses, health screeners, counselors, custodians, para-professionals to support learning loss, etc.).

***Systems - School reopening supports must focus on the critical systems needed to support students in a variety of learning models, and the state must employ its economies of scale to best serve local needs.***

- **Technology** - The department will continue to prioritize expanding 1:1 device access for students statewide, along with connectivity for those devices. This will occur through a \$50M matching grant (that requires districts to have a sustainability plan). With that, the department will focus on technical assistance and support and teacher/staff professional development to help interested districts effectively utilize technology solutions. The department will continue to provide concierge service to support district purchasing.
- **Negotiated Rates:** The department negotiated statewide reduced rates for technology device purchases and for connectivity, allowing for all districts to access the benefits of scaled bargaining power, earlier than other states (February).
- Partnership with Hoonuit to provide families with the most **up-to-date information on meal pick-up locations closest to them** through SchoolMealFinder.com. Hoonuit utilizes an interactive map to allow users to search by city, zip code, and address to locate the nearest food pick-up site.

Despite these resources, broadband connectivity remains one of the biggest barriers for remote learning, especially for some of our rural, distressed districts. Broadband connectivity should be a top funding priority for the federal government in supporting school re-openings. Additional resources could support broadband expansion, WiFi or MiFi access for every student, ensuring 1:1 technology access for all students, logistical support for food and resource delivery, and specialized equipment for children who need access to greater resources (especially those with disabilities, those who are highly mobile, and those need translation and English Learner supports).



We know that this school year will look and feel different. Districts are trying to make decisions with changing information and the lives and livelihoods of children and staff to consider. This is a serious discussion that is worthy of equally appropriate tone and understanding of the complexities that exist.

Unlike other states, Tennessee has maintained the same level of state funding to our schools and districts as in previous years thanks to the commitment of Governor Bill Lee and the Tennessee General Assembly. This demonstrates the state's clear and continued commitment to schools. However, this is not like other years. The needs are greater, and federal support can dramatically impact our ability to provide a quality education – safely – for children and for staff.

We must appreciate the individualized perspectives that vary dramatically across communities; we need to accept that this is hard and it is certainly not straightforward. Families must make their own choices, and districts must ensure that they are providing the flexibility necessary to support those choices. If schools are going to be open, it must be done safely and allow for the flexibilities necessary to protect vulnerable staff and students. If schools are going to be closed, then cities and communities will need to have clear plans on how they will support working families who may not have the option to work from home; how they will provide food to every household just as students would receive at school; how they will provide the required special education, language, counseling and health services necessary for students to continue learning alongside their peers; how they will teach children to read remotely; how they will address the increasing and unreported cases of abuse; how they will address the suicide rates we are seeing in our youth; and how they will do all of this while ensuring children continue to be educated.

At the core, we must talk about school reopening with the level of detail and reality that our superintendents deal with every day. Keeping schools closed saves lives. Opening schools saves other lives. Both have long-term consequences. This is why options are so important. It is also why federal funding will certainly help our districts, schools, and communities to create those options with the resources necessary to do so safely and responsibly for all.

Regardless, we need to have these conversations and take these actions with understanding, compassion, and information. We must do this with staff and students in mind, and children at heart. This is one of those moments for our field, and our country. Our kids deserve our best right now. Nothing less is acceptable.

Thank you and I look forward to answering any questions from the committee members about the great work being done in the Volunteer State.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Penny Schwinn". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Penny Schwinn, PhD  
Commissioner  
Tennessee Department of Education